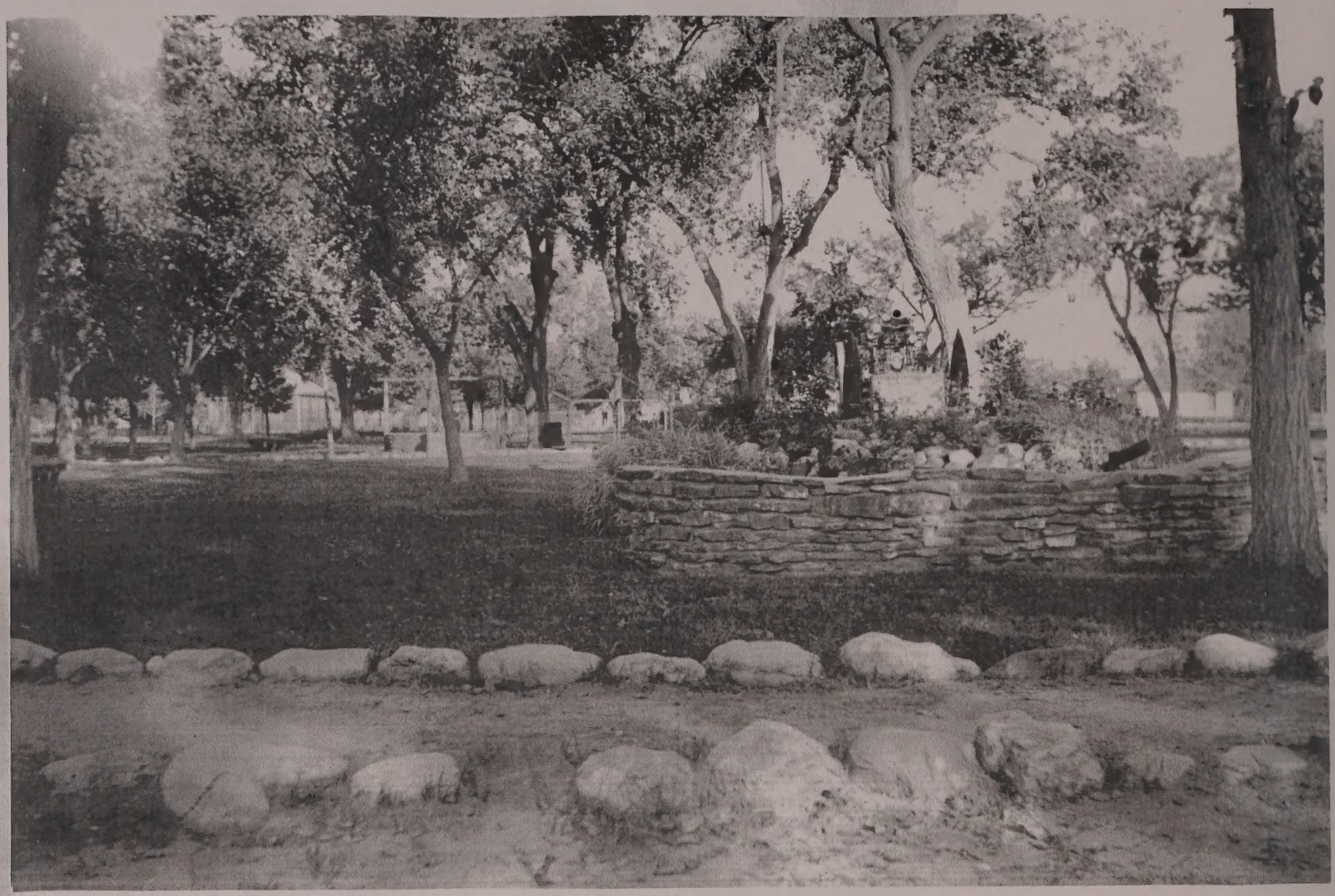
BHHC-4-1-2

Belen



Anna Becker Park 1930

January 2002

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
		1	2	3	4	5

BHHC-4-1-21
Anna Becker Park

BHC-4-7-2

CARL HALAMA
CLERK
ELFEGO G. BACA
TREASURER
JOHN F. BAGGERLY
ATTORNEY

City Of Belen

C. HENDREN, MAYOR

BELEN, N. M.

CITY COUNCIL
R. R. GALLEGOS
M. H. TATE
AGAPITO GARCIA
M. J. CASTILLO

July 9th, 1931

Mr. John Becker

Belen N.M.

Dear Sir,

The Board of Trustees have instructed me, to write to you in regard to theDeed for the City Park which we received through the Officers of the Women's Club.

Allthough the Women Club were last in possesion of this Park, we want to go on record in the name of the City, to exteht our thanks and appreciation to you as the original giver.

In talking over the selection of a name for this Park we were informed by Mrs. W. D. Radcliffe, that you expressed your wish, to have it named after your late wife, Mrs. Anna Becker if this correct, I would suggest the name of Anna Becker's Memorial Park, and would be glad to bring this up at the next regular Meeting if you would so inform me.

The Board of Trustees of the Village of Belen

By Carl Halama

Clerk

C,H,

Anna Becker Park

1992.002.085

July II,1931

The Honorable Board of Trustees
and Mr. Carl Halama,Clerk
City of Belen.

Gentlemen:

Acknowledging receipt of your favor of 9th inst. I wish to thank you for giving me the opportunety to honor my late wife'memory by naming the park "ANNA BECKERS MEMORIEL PARK",I wish to express my thanks also to the Womens club members for their part in this action.

Again thanking the Honarable board of Trustees and Mr. Halama,

Yours respectfully,

VN Bulletin
12/20/2003

Valencia County News-Bulletin

LA VIDA

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ICE SKATERS are shown on the Belen Lake in about 1915. The photo is from the Valencia County Historical Society's *Valencia County, New Mexico: History Through the Photographer's Lens* by Margaret Espinosa McDonald and Richard Melzer. Belenites often skated on the frozen pond during the last century's cold winters. After his wife Anna's death, John Becker dedicated the land for a park named in her honor.

Celebrating a long marriage, John Becker names park for wife, Anna

(La Historia del Rio Abajo is a monthly column about Valencia County history written by members of the Valencia County Historical Society.

The authors of this month's column would like to thank the many people who shared their memories about Anna Becker Park, especially Bill Gore, Tommy and Joan Dils and the late Austin and Dorothy Lovett.

The authors would like to dedicate their article to LeRoy Vallejos and his city Parks and Recreation crew, who have worked so hard to keep Anna Becker Park beautiful and safe for all of us who call the Rio Abajo our home.)

ANNA AND JOHN BECKER are seen in portraits taken from the Valencia County Historical Society's book, *Rio Abajo Heritage.*

Anna Becker Park has been an essential part of the Belen community for nearly 70 years. Hundreds drive by it each day. Many stop by to enjoy the park and its facilities each week.

In fact, we refer to Anna Becker Park so often that its name seems to roll off the tongue as if it were a single word. But few know how the park got its name, no less who Anna Becker was in Belen history.

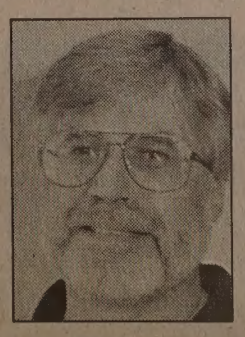
Christmas seems an ideal time to answer these historical questions because Anna Becker Park was a generous gift to the town of Belen by one of the community's greatest benefactors, John Becker.

As the longest, most successful merchant in Belen's history, John Becker contributed to his town's growth in many ways.

Opened in 1877, Becker's mercantile store was the center of local trade for almost a century. His flour mill ground wheat for farming families up and down the Rio Grande valley. His wool storage business purchased wool from local sheep ranchers and shipped it to distant markets by the trainload.

Becker's Town and Improvement Company opened large new sections of town, including the new railroad yards located eight blocks east of Belen's Main Street. And Becker's First National Bank of Belen was the dominant financial institution in town from its founding in 1903 to at least the early 1960s.

la historia del rio abajo



Richard Melzer

Margaret Espinosa McDonald

There is no doubt that John Becker profited handsomely from these many enterprises, but so did the people and town of Belen in direct and indirect ways. Several generations of local farmers, ranchers and store employees based their livelihood on John Becker's operations. Consumers bought goods, families purchased homes and residents deposited savings and secured loans through one or another of Becker's businesses. It was difficult to find anyone in the Belen area whose economic life was not touched by this early business pioneer.

But John Becker contributed to Belen and its citizens in non-business ways as well. A list of his many civic activities and gifts to his community could literally fill pages.

Providing more than half of the cost of the construction of the Zion Lutheran Evangelical Church (later the Federated Church, the Presbyterian Church, and now the Riverside Funeral Home) was one of Becker's most generous contributions. Becker also donated land for the construction of Valencia County High School, the first secondary school built in our community.

And John Becker donated the land for the creation of Belen's first town park, located on a 300- by 410-foot plot of land on the north side of busy Reinken Avenue.

Becker had long used this land as a desagua, or pond to drain off excess water from his irrigated alfalfa fields, located just to the south. The pond, locally known as the Belen Lake, was also used as a recreation area in both summer and winter seasons. The lake was deep enough for at least row boating. And, demonstrating how cold our winters could be in those days, the lake froze so often that residents of all ages used it for ice skating — a new sport for many members of the local community.

But the Belen Lake proved to be hazardous as well, especially in the summer months when swarms of mosquitoes

See **La Historia,** *Page 5B*

CHURCH NOTES

New Life Fellowship sets Dec. 21 program

A Christmas program will be presented at 10 a.m. Sunday, Dec. 21, at Raymond Gabaldon Intermediate School by New Life Fellowship Church of Los Lunas.

Christmas cantata sung at Belen Baptist Church

A Christmas cantata, "The Greatest Story Ever Told," will be presented at 6 p.m. Sunday, Dec. 21, at the Belen Baptist Church, 302 S. Main St. Pastor is Sal Garcia. For information, call 315-1603.

Christmas musical held at Belen Methodist

"S.O.C.C.E.R. — Save Our Christmas Carol Emergency Rescue," a Christmas musical, will be presented at 4 p.m. Sunday, Dec. 21, by the children, youth and adults of the First United Methodist Church in Belen.

The musical tells of the friction that sometimes exists between the generations about music and how it can be overcome with a bit of understanding. Christmas music from the past and present will be included. The church is at Reinken and Third.

Methodists schedule Christmas Eve services

Christmas Eve worship services at 5 p.m. and 7 p.m. will be held, including candles and communion, at the First United Methodist Church of Belen. The first service will have a contemporary feel and include the youth bell choir and other special music. The 7 p.m. service will be a bit more traditional with the church choir singing.

The church is located at Reinken and Third. A nursery will be available at both services. For information, call 864-6095.

Live Nativity performed at Valley Nazarene Church

A live Nativity will be set up from 5:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. Christmas Eve at Valencia Valley Nazarene Church, 33 El Cerro Road in Los Lunas. Goodies will be served, music played and a service will be held at 9 p.m.

Candlelight service held on Christmas Eve

First Presbyterian Church of Belen, 85 Manzano Expressway, will have its Christmas Eve Candlelight Service at 7 p.m. Dec. 24. It will be a service of scripture, sermon and carols.

Bible study beings at Grace Fellowship

Grace Fellowship will begin a 10-part Bible study entitled "Breaking Free" on Jan. 10. The group will meet every other Saturday at the church from 9:15 a.m. to 11:15 a.m. The study by Beth Moore is open to all interested women in the community. A workbook for the study is available at the Branch bookstore in Los Lunas. For more information, call the church at 865-4722 or Chris Chavez at 864-3377.

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Spring Classes Start Jan. 20th
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UNM-Valencia Campus
280 La Entrada • Los Lunas, NM 87031

STOP FEEDING
THE PIG

La Historia

from **PAGE 1B**

infested the still water, gravely endangering the health of nearby residents.

No one drowned in the lake, but the danger existed, especially for unattended children at play. Bill Gore remembers the day he and his brother Bob fell off a makeshift raft and had to scramble ashore, gratefully unharmed.

Well aware of these problems, town leaders ordered that the lake be filled in. Dirt was trucked in to fill most of the pond, but a highly unusual item was used as well.

Clifford Keith, the legendary coach at Belen High School, owned an old Model T Ford, affectionately known as the Silver Bullet. Coach Keith generously let his players and friends borrow the car whenever they needed transportation, be it to a game or on a hunting trip.

After much use, the Silver Bullet was recognized as beyond repair. Lacking a place to dispose of it, Coach Keith decided to use the old car to help fill in the Belen Lake. According to local legend, the Silver Bullet still sits buried somewhere below the surface of the park today.

John Becker had plotted the land for a park as early as 1904. His only request was that the new park be named in honor of his wife, Anna Becker.

Anna Becker was born Anna Vielstich in Lesum, Germany. Like John, Anna and her family were devout members of a Lutheran sect known as the Zion Lutheran Evangelical Church. One of the sect's strict rules required all members to marry within the church.

Like many German families of the 19th century, Anna's family migrated to Wisconsin, settling in Milwaukee, where a large Zion Lutheran Evangelical community thrived by the 1870s.

When young John Becker searched for a suitable wife, he naturally thought of Wisconsin as a likely source of a German bride belonging to his sect of the Lutheran Church. John met Anna on a trip to Wisconsin, and, we can assume, they fell in love.

We know little about John Becker's courtship of Anna Vielstich other than that it must have been difficult, given the considerable distance between Wisconsin and New Mexico. The couple nevertheless married in Santa Fe on Nov. 2, 1877. John was 27. Anna was 26.

Anna moved to Belen to live with her new groom in living quarters on the north side of the mercantile store he had built on South Main Street. Photos of the interior of their home do not exist, but we can imagine it decorated with as much German furniture and decorations as the Beckers could include so far from their European homeland.

Although surrounded by Hispanic and Indian cultures, the Beckers never attempted to dominate or replace native ways directly. In fact, based on their strict religious beliefs, the Beckers and most other German immigrants in Valencia County were determined to preserve their own language, culture and religion at home and as a separate ethnic group.

We can nevertheless imagine that Anna Becker missed her family and friends in Germany and Wisconsin. Husband John helped fill this void by inviting several members of Anna's family to live and work in Belen.

Anna's Uncle Jacob thus came to Belen to serve as the floor supervisor in Becker's store. John's brother Fred married Anna's sister Johanna and lived in Belen, as did Anna's nephew Paul Dalies, her niece Hannah Dalies, her half-brother Lueder, and her cousins, the Endersteins.

Anna also satisfied her longings for home and German culture by accompanying her husband on trips to Wisconsin and on fairly regular trips to Germany.

Meanwhile, John and Anna Becker expanded their immediate family with the births of four sons (Hans, Louis, Gustav and Bernhart) and two daughters (Anita and Lucie). A German nanny, Bertha Ruiz, helped Anna raise her growing family. Bertha arrived from the German community in Ripon, Wis., in 1889 when she was only 16 years old.

As the Becker children grew to maturity, several entered one phase or another of the family's extensive business interests. When Lucie grew to adulthood, her father built her a two-story house to the west of his store and within yards of the Becker family home. As the story goes, anyone in the store at lunchtime could expect an invitation to dine at Lucie's, along with the rest of the family and the store's large staff.

The Beckers' oldest son, Hans (or John Jr.), joined the store's staff at an early age, making the mercantile business his career until his death in 1939. The youngest son, Bernhart, better known as Bernard, also worked in the Becker store until he enlisted in the Army during World War I.

Louis, known as L.C., worked in the First National Bank through most of his life, serving as the bank's distinguished president until his death in 1971.

Anna herself was an integral part of her husband's business, working in his store and serving local customers for many years. Anna learned to speak Spanish soon after her arrival in New Mexico. John insisted that all of his employees speak the local language, to better accommodate their predominately Hispanic customers.

According to at least one customer, Anna could be a shrewd, sometimes insistent salesperson. This customer recalled the day she went to the Beckers' store to buy new winter coats for her two daughters.

Anna showed the customer the coats in stock, but each was several sizes too large for the woman's children. Anna nevertheless convinced her to buy the oversized garments, arguing that the girls would grow into them eventually anyway!

Anna Becker's private life was also filled with activity, including many German social events. Picnics, featuring good German food and music, were especially popular. Many danced to German tunes on outdoor wooden dance floors. Photos show Anna surrounded by loving family and friends, clearly enjoying her life in the Rio Abajo.

But Anna's life was not without tragedy. Two of her children died early deaths, one living less than a month in 1879 and the other living less than a year, from Sept. 26, 1891, to Sept. 3, 1892. Gustav, Anna's third oldest son, was killed in a football accident while attending the Northwestern Military Academy in Lake Geneva, Wis. Eighteen-year-old Gustav died on Oct. 7, 1903.

Anna Becker lived to be 71 years old, dying of natural causes on Dec. 4, 1922. John survived his first wife by 10 years, taking a second wife, Ina Innebickler, in 1927, but joining Anna in death after suffering a short illness in the spring of 1932. John and Anna were buried side-by-side in Belen's Protestant cemetery. Their two children who died in infancy are buried nearby.

The park to be named in Anna's memory became a reality soon after John and Anna's deaths.

A local park committee was organized to plan the important project in 1934. With no funding available from a debt-ridden town government, several civic organizations took up the slack, providing time and whatever funding they could each afford.

Members of Belen's Eastern Star Lodge thus built a flower garden in the shape of a star at a cost of $25. The star is still visible on the park's northwest corner.

The Veterans Council appropriated $45 to install a cannon in memory of U.S. foreign wars. The Knights of Columbus pitched in another $60 for a drinking fountain. And the Tubercular Association installed a children's merry-go-round for $84.

Belen's chapter of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, or WCTU, sponsored the construction of the most ambitious project in the new park: a gazebo or bandstand. WCTU members had raised $120 for a wooden bandstand but were persuaded to build a more lasting structure with a concrete base, indoor restrooms and a storeroom below.

Praised as "a credit to any large city," the more permanent structure cost the WCTU an additional $145.

The Becker family contributed $50 of their own money to build a concrete marker in honor of their matriarch. A small bronze plate on the marker bears the simple engraving, "Anna Becker Park: Dedicated by John Becker in Memory of His Wife." Although sometimes obscured by large shrubbery, the marker still stands on the park's north side.

While local groups and the Becker family bore the cost of materials, federal public works programs provided the labor to build Anna Becker Park. New Deal agencies of the 1930s, including the CWA and the FERA, employed an average of 25 men daily, paying their wages and aiding many destitute families at the height of the Great Depression.

The residents of Belen made good use of their new park from the moment it was completed. Band concerts in the park were provided each Saturday evening for the balance of the summer in 1934.

Over the years, children played. Families enjoyed picnics. Friends visited. Youth groups held ice cream socials. And residents celebrated holidays, including the Fourth of July and Martin Luther King Jr. Day.

Appropriately for the town of Bethlehem (Belen), the most impressive holiday celebrations were held during the Christmas season, from 1963 to 1974. Led by the Belen Chamber of Commerce, organizations from the Knights of Columbus to the Pilot Club helped make the annual event a great success. As many as 27 displays filled the park, with children's displays on the north end and religious displays to the south, along Reinken Avenue.

Much has changed at the park over the last several years. The restrooms below the bandstand are long gone, replaced by nearby facilities. The park's cannon was moved to Los Lunas when some objected that it was too militaristic and potentially dangerous for kids to climb on, although hundreds of local residents had done so in their early years.

Recent changes have included the construction of additional parking spaces, the purchase of new playground equipment and, most recently, the addition of a large covered pavilion. The pavilion was first used as part of this year's Christmas celebration, just days after it was installed.

Anna Becker Park is still the center of many events in Belen, just as the plaza is the center of community life in Tomé and Daniel Fernandez Park is the center of much social activity in Los Lunas. Like public parks throughout the world, each park in Valencia County is the heart of its respective community and that community's proud cultural identity.

How fitting that John Becker gave Anna Becker Park to Belen in memory of the very heart of his life and his family. His was the perfect gift, culminating a lifetime of giving to the town he and Anna had loved and appreciated so much in the Rio Abajo.